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Take Care You Fool – Luke 12:13-21

Let us pray: Lord, we ask you that these words that were spoken so many centuries ago, may speak to us today. Open our ears, open our minds, and open our hearts so we may hear your will for our lives, and that your name may be praised. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray this, Amen.

One day C. H. Spurgeon was walking through the English countryside with a friend. As they strolled along, the evangelist noticed a barn with a weathervane on its roof. At the top of the vane were these words: GOD IS LOVE.

Spurgeon remarked to his companion that he thought this was a rather inappropriate place for such a message. "Weathervanes are changeable," he said, "but God's love is constant."

"I don't agree with you about those words, Charles," replied his friend. "You misunderstood the meaning. That sign is indicating a truth: Regardless of which way the wind blows, God is love."

God is love even when we act like fools. This week's Rich Fool parable becomes a cute reminder that you never see U-Haul trailers or moving vans behind hearses.

The tragic tale of the Rich Fool isn't a reminder that we might die sooner than we hoped or that we might find ourselves wishing that we had spent more time at the kids' basketball games and less at the office (although those are useful lessons from time to time).

The parable digs deeper, toward the heart. It tells about money's ability to impoverish your soul and rewire your values. The way the parable is explicitly framed (in Luke 12:15) makes it warn against greed, hoarding, and selfish preoccupation with one's own security.

It offers an explanation for why otherwise ordinary or hard-working people might end up existing in their own self-absorbed universes, constructing lives in which they don't have to give a damn about anybody else, especially people they can't see. Or don't want to see. What exactly does the parable explain? That greed is idolatry.

The man in the parable has chosen to live in a world of one. Speaking to himself about the pleasures he can enjoy, his words reveal that no one else matters to him. He is the epitome of a "me, myself and I first" ideology.

Have you ever been so envious of or wishful for another's life that you were unable or unwilling to celebrate his or her successes, abilities, or good fortune? You look at them and say to yourself, "What about me?"

That's not fair. Why isn't that me?" "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed." Has the grammar of your life ever been predominately in the first person singular, I? I want, I need, I did, I hope, I achieved, I accomplished, I will. I, I, I. "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed."

Jesus tells the story about quarreling brothers. "Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.' Jesus replied, 'Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?'" (12:13-14)

Picture Jesus has been teaching for some time about the Kingdom. Suddenly, someone in the back calls out and interrupts the whole group with a question. Not a question, really, but an insistence that Jesus straighten out the man's legal affairs. It was rude, out of place, it didn't ring true.

The man who has called out sounds like a younger brother who doesn't feel he is getting his due. Inheritance in Israel was devised to keep land in the family, rather than let it go to other tribes or individuals.

In addition, the man who prompts the parable in the first place, who petitions Jesus for help in getting part of the family inheritance, appears to be asking a respected spiritual leader to validate his own desire for wealth.

Greed shows its true identity as idolatry when Jesus says over and over again in Luke that we must beware of what money can do to us. Greed compels us to banish anyone who looks like they might threaten "what's ours."

The Lord Jesus doesn't say that it's wrong to have wealth or to be wealthy. He doesn't say that you can't be his disciple if you have wealth. In fact, Jesus doesn't propose a target income that is acceptable and then beyond that we're in trouble.

Rather he says, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." So...let's be clear. Jesus doesn't say it's wrong to have wealth. He constantly warns that obsession with wealth can become an idol.

Now I know plenty of Christians that think that Jesus is very opposed to wealth. I also know some Christians that think that God has blessed them with wealth because they have been more faithful disciples than others. In a sense, they see wealth as a divine kickback for having been good.

Just so long as they go to church, keep their nose clean, and give away 10% to the church, then God is pleased to bless them even more. For these folks, wealth is a sign of divine favor – regardless how they made it.

I also know quite a few Christians that don't think seriously about God and wealth at the same time. An old Baptist friend says, "The reason your Presbyterian churches are always short of money is that you only baptize people's heads. Because those Presbyterian wallets didn't get wet, your people think the money belongs to them and not to the Lord."

Well...Jesus doesn't say there are limited resources in the world. And Jesus doesn't say that if you give God 10% the rest is yours as a reward. And Jesus absolutely doesn't say that you can live as if God and money were separated from one another.

Rather the Lord Jesus says that greed is bad and being consumed with possessions is worse. If you become obsessed with having more and more, your possessions will possess you. And you will forget that God is the maker and owner of all things including everything you have and all that you are!

There are people who tend to hold onto a large number of items that most people would consider not useful or valuable. Junk mail, old catalogues and newspapers, things that might help make crafts, clothes that "might" be worn sometime in the future, broken things, "freebies" from department stores. These people are called hoarders and there's even a documentary series that airs on the A&E television network with the same name—Hoarders.

This series depicts the real-life struggles and treatment of people who suffer from compulsive hoarding. It is a pattern of behavior that is characterized by the excessive acquisition of many items and the inability or unwillingness to discard of them to such an extent that they cover the living areas of one's home and cause significant distress, impairment, or even illness.

What is intriguing to me is that apparently Hoarders debuted as the most-watched series premiere in A&E network history among adults aged 18–49 and tied for the most ever among adults aged 25–54. Why are people drawn to this show? I wonder if in some way it represents our lives on steroids.

Possessions by themselves are not necessarily problematic. Problems arise in relation to our relationship to them. What we do with them and why we have them. Greed and a disproportionate interest in possessions is certainly one of the great challenges we all face in our contemporary society.

Yet, it would not be fair to say this is something totally new or exclusive to our times, for it certainly seems to also be a real challenge for the crowds listening to Jesus in today's gospel passage from Luke.

In the parable contained in today's gospel, God calls the man who stores up an abundance of food for years "a fool." I can't help but make the connection with the foolish behavior that is so prevalent in today's "super-size it" society and in our constant need to buy a lot more than we could ever consume, just to "be safe" or to obtain a false sense of security.

The truth is that every time we discard food, because we don't know what to do with it or where to put it, we are manifesting the worst kind of human greed and wastefulness; we are also showing great disregard for God's creation and the resources we have been so abundantly blessed with.

I can assure you there are hungry people not far from your home who would feel blessed to receive what many of us simply choose to throw away. I recall a missionary priest from one of the poorest regions in Central America who would visit South Florida twice a year to fill huge containers with everything that a community in Miami wanted to throw out--everything one could imagine from old clothes to outdated and mostly broken electronics.

One day a group of clergies approached him and said, "Father, what do you do with all this garbage?" The priest humbly bowed his head and then raised his eyes and said, "I want you to know that with all these objects that are now useless to you has sustained my missionary parish and the neighboring community for the last 30 years.

My people value everything you call 'garbage' and they fix it; they recycle it or make some use of each of these things. Nothing gets thrown out." I invite you to allow the words of today's gospel to resonate in your life,

and I invite you to begin to experience what it means to be "rich toward God," for to be truly "rich toward God" requires a real change of attitude which considers everything we have as a blessing from above and to treasure those blessings by sharing them generously.

True Christian charity begins in the heart and then translates into heart-felt actions. As the great American comedian Bob Hope once said, "If you haven't got any charity in your heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble."

And indeed, perhaps that is what we may be suffering from-- "heart trouble," the kind of heart trouble that makes us unable to fully experience the loving great generosity of God, furthermore, our inability to plainly see

God's bountiful providence in our lives. When we come to terms with the fact that God's generosity is great, we begin to realize how much more generous we must be, we who are created in God's image and likeness.

In the way we use water and food, in the way we use our money and resources and in our care of all of creation, we can be "rich toward God" by becoming much more responsible stewards of what we have been blessed with, and this becomes especially true and personal when we begin to realize that our abundance is not meant to be consumed solely by us, but must be protected, cared for and properly distributed. Amen.

Let us pray. Lord, you have blessed us with so much! We want you to know that we are truly grateful. Let us never fall into the trap of becoming wasteful or overly preoccupied with storing up for ourselves that which is not truly necessary and let us use everything you have blessed us with to be a blessing for others. May your generosity toward us make us truly more generous toward all, especially those in greatest need. Amen.